

# **NATIONALISM:**

## **Interpreters and Interpretations**

by  
**BOYD C. SHAFFER**

Executive Secretary  
American Historical Association

*Publication Number 20*

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SERVICE CENTER FOR TEACHERS OF HISTORY

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## NATIONALISM: INTERPRETERS AND INTERPRETATIONS<sup>1</sup>

By Boyd C. Shafer\*

Nations today are the chief groups into which people politically, economically, and socially divide. The nation today is a major object of men's devotion and loyalty, the one object for which they will commonly fight and die. It is in national groupings that men have fought the great modern wars, been vanquished or victorious, in our times have died in millions. The powerful political units today are the national governments. These tax, administer justice, provide social security, protect and control business and agriculture, spend vast funds, enter into the lives of every citizen; in sum, determine in large part what every man thinks and does. And in turn, good citizens seek their welfare within the nation, demand that their fellow citizens conform to its ideals, protect it, and seek fulfillment of their aspirations within it. The general welfare is not the general welfare of mankind but of nations of men. Liberties are not universal but national. Mankind exists in imagination, but men are Englishmen, Egyptians, Russians, Chinese, Brazilians, and Americans. Today when men identify

\* This pamphlet is a revised version of an article "Nationalism—some Myths and Realities," published in *The Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. XII, No. 2, 1958.

<sup>1</sup> Among the many general and specialized studies of nationalism are: Frederick C. Barghoorn, *Soviet Russian Nationalism*, New York, 1956; Merle E. Curti, *The Roots of American Loyalty*, New York, 1946; Francis Delaisi, *Political Myths and Economic Realities*, New York, 1927; Carlton J. H. Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism*, New York, 1926, and *The Historical Evolution of Nationalism*, New York, 1931; Friedrich O. Hertz, *Nationality in History and Politics, A Study of the Psychology and Sociology of National Sentiment and Character*, Oxford, 1944; René Johannet, *Le principe des nationalités*, Paris, new ed., 1923; Otto Klineberg, *Tensions Affecting International Understanding*, New York, 1950; Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study of Its Origin and Background*, New York, 1949, and *American Nationalism: An Interpretative Essay*, New York, 1957; Friedrich Meinecke, *Weltpflicht und Nationalstaat: Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaates*, Munich, 1928; Royal Institute of International Affairs, *Nationalism: A Report by A Study Group of Members of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, London, 1939; Boyd C. Shafer, *Nationalism, Myth and Reality*, New York, 1955; Georges Weill, *L'Europe du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et l'idée de nationalité*, Paris, 1938; Florjan Znaniecki, *Modern Nationalities: A Sociological Study*, Urbana, 1952. Two bibliographies are Karl Deutsch, *Interdisciplinary Bibliography on Nationalism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1956; and Koppel Pinson, *A Bibliographical Introduction to Nationalism*, New York, 1935.

themselves, they tend to think first of their nationality and they believe that their own nationality has distinct and peculiar characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

All this is true everywhere on our shrinking globe, in Europe where nations are old, in the Near and Far East where old peoples comprise new nations. At bottom, the trouble over the Suez was a conflict among old and new nationalism: British, French, Egyptian, and Israeli. In Asia, the nations of India and Pakistan dispute the Kashmir, and the Chinese and the Indonesians violently rise to throw off what they call "the yoke of Western Imperialism," the domination of older Western nations. In South America, "Yankee Imperialism" has long been anathema. Everywhere men seek realization of their dearest dreams, whatever they may be, within their nations. Everywhere they erect their nations into bulwarks, no matter how shaky, against adversity. This devotion to their nation we call "nationalism."<sup>3</sup> Men give this devotion, however, for many different reasons, and their devotion is of many different qualities and intensities. French nationalism is not the same as English, the Chinese not the same as the Japanese, the Brazilian not the same as the Argentinean. We shall have to define our terms more fully and precisely.

What it is that men think of the nation? Throughout modern history the meaning of the word has changed as conditions and as men's loyalties have changed. At present the concept usually means at least some unit of territory, a people with a common past and some common cultural characteristics as a common language, and

<sup>2</sup> Though the facts are few and the subject slippery, historians, anthropologists, psychologists, and propagandists have theorized at length about national character. As he proceeds with caution the student may wish to read: Sir Ernest Barker, ed., *The Character of England*, Oxford, 1947; Denis Brogan, *The American Character*, New York, 1944; Henry Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880's*, New Haven, 1950; Salvador Madariaga, *Englishmen, Frenchmen, Spaniards: An Essay in Comparative Psychology*, London, 1928; Margaret Mead, "National Character," in A. L. Kroeber, ed., *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory*, Chicago, 1953, pp. 642-667; and David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, Chicago, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> The definitions are many. See Shafer, *Nationalism*, pp. 3-11. The "classic" definition is that of Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" *Discours et conférences*, Paris, 1887. See also Louis Snyder, *The Meaning of Nationalism*, New Brunswick, 1954; and Guido Zernatto, "Nation: The History of a Word," *Review of Politics*, Vol. VI, 1944, pp. 351-66.

an independent government (actual or hoped for). The devotion to this territory, these characteristics, this history, this government, we call nationalism. When men are nationalists they love their native land; they hold their fellow nationals in high esteem while often they dislike foreigners; they find pride in the national achievements and sorrow in the national tragedies; they admire their own real or imagined history; they hope that their nation will have a glorious future. And so they will fight and, if need be, die for their nation. The tragedy of the Hungarians is but one late example. Hundreds of others could be picked from the world's history of the last two centuries.

When men love their nations, they do so for a variety of reasons, some of them without foundation in fact. Now patriotism is a glorious emotion. For their nation men have performed many heroic deeds and tragically died. If men possess national patriotism, they ought not base it on myths. Perhaps, too, if men based their patriotism on realities, their nationalism might not be so belligerent.

Historical myths which people believe are often more real than hard facts which they may ignore. Here, to call a belief a myth is not to deny that in the process of history myths have had tremendous import, consequences at times transcending even those arising out of actual experienced truth. Quite the contrary. Perhaps most of the time most of us act on beliefs which have little or no concrete facts behind them. But, as students of nationalism, we ought to be exact, sort out the knowable from the unknowable, the fact from fancy.

Men have indulged in a good many fancies about the origin and development of their nations. When they have not found sufficient material explanation, they have, for example, fallen back upon God or divine forces, imagining, as have the Jews and English and French and Germans and Americans, that God singled them out as a chosen people. John Quincy Adams wrote to his famous father: "The whole continent of North America appears to be destined by *Divine Providence* to be peopled by one nation."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy*, New York, 1949, p. 182. *The American Idea of Mission* is described by Edward McNall Burns, New Brunswick, 1957; and by Albert Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History*, Balti-

In England in the nineteenth century an Anglo-Israel Identity Society declared that the English descended from the Lost Tribes.

We cannot here wrestle with the monumental question of God's will in regard to nations. All we can say on this point is that God's will concerning the nations is thus far unfathomable to man, or at least the different nations have interpreted God's will quite differently.

When, in the eighteenth century, philosophers turned from divine to what they thought more rational interpretations of man, natural law became an explanation for the nation. In simplified form, this meant that men, as Adam Smith and Rousseau wrote, naturally turned to the nation as the chief object of their affections. But here the social philosophers were guessing. Influenced by the new Newtonian science, they thought they could, like the physicists working on natural phenomena, find the natural laws concerning human behavior. They then found that men's love of nation was natural. The ways of nature in this case, however, are as unfathomable as the ways of God. There was and is no evidence that nature intended men to live in nations or that they should be devoted to them. Rousseau quite unconsciously proved this when he had to advise the King of Poland to provide a patriotic education for his subjects.

When conservative political philosophers like Edmund Burke and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel spurned natural explanations of this kind, they did not reject the nation. They turned to mystical forces arising out of history. To Burke, the nation was an inspired union of the historical, the present, and the unborn generations, an organic personality embodying the "moral essences" of the ages.<sup>5</sup> This, of course, is a kind of mysticism which soars higher than evidence. That nations evolved in history is a truism, but that is as far as evidence or logic will go.

There are all sorts of other mystical explanations, or rather,

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more, 1935. A somewhat similar Russian belief, Pan-Slavism, is described by Hans Kohn, *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology*, Notre Dame, 1953; and Michael Petrovich, *The Emergence of Russian Panslavism*, New York, 1956.

<sup>5</sup> See particularly his *Reflections on the French Revolution* (many editions) and his *Reform of Representation in the House of Commons*, Works, Bohn, Ed., London, 1861, Vol. IV, pp. 146 ff.

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justifications for the nations. Nations are supposed to be determined by the climate and by natural boundaries. Physical environment turns out to be no explanation at all.<sup>6</sup> Not only England is another Eden, a demi-paradise, a blessed plot—at least in other people's minds. The fact is other people think their lands Edens. The facts are that the climates of several nations are similar—Russia and the United States, Germany and France, Japan and England, and each of the major nations possesses within itself a variety of climates. Nor is the argument about natural boundaries anymore tenable.

Natural boundaries, on examination, turn out to be the boundaries out to which national groups have reached by chance, diplomatic victories, and national warfare, or they do not exist at all. For France, the so-called "natural" boundaries, the Rhine, the Alps, the Pyrenees, were established not by nature, but by the able military exploits of Philip the Fair, Louis XIV, Joan of Arc, and Carnot. Where are the "natural" boundaries of eastern Germany, or most any central European nation, of northwest India, of northwestern United States, of western Russia? Finally, what about all the natural obstacles, the Mississippi, the Volga, the Amazon, the Urals, the Rockies, which do not divide? National boundaries are not natural but national, and national boundaries, unlike natural, have shifted constantly as nations have been weak or powerful.

More fiercely held than the fantasy about natural boundaries is that concerning the racial basis of nations, the myth arising out of the brilliant rhetoric and factual emptiness of the writings of the Frenchman Count Gobineau, the Englishman Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and many a popular neurotic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Race as an explanation of human behavior has been fairly well debunked in our time in well-merited attacks on Hitler's nonsense.<sup>7</sup> The facts are that nobody knows

<sup>6</sup> But some geographers think so. See, for example, Ellsworth Huntington, *Main-springs of Civilization*, New York, 1945; and Derwent Whittlesey, *Environmental Foundations of European Civilization*, New York, 1949.

<sup>7</sup> Among the studies see Jacques Barzun, *Race. A study in Modern Superstition*, New York, 1937; Ruth Benedict, *Race: Science and Politics*, New York, 1940; Franz Boas, *Anthropology and Modern Life*, New York, 1932; William C. Boyd, *Genetics and the Rages of Man: An Introduction to Modern Physical Anthropology*, Boston,

what a race is, or whether, if such a grouping as a race exists, it determines anything about men except some physical characteristics. Historically, men have endlessly mixed. As the anthropologist Ralph Linton told us, there has never been a tribe whose women have been so hideous they have not attracted men of other tribes, and there has never been a tribe whose men were so cowardly that they would not steal women of other tribes. All the nations are mixed—the United States is an outstanding example. Race, then, turns out to be no explanation at all for nations and nationalism, though the belief of people in racial ideas certainly has led them to become nationalistic.

About the same time as the racial myth was arising, about a century ago, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were building another one, that the bourgeoisie created nations in order to develop markets for its goods and, thereby, profit.<sup>8</sup> There may be some truth in this: Alexander Hamilton thought of the national government as the agency to develop manufactures, trade, and finance. The trouble with the materialist explanation is that it is too simple, overlooking, by way of illustration, the role of the monarchs and nobility in building nations as well as the loyalty modern workers have given to their nations. Modern nations have long been growing—probably their origins are to be found in the eleventh century; the bourgeoisie was not a decisive force until the eighteenth century. And in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, workers have usually been as nationalistic as any group.

Most scholars, in trying to find a logical basis for nations and nationalism, have turned to language.<sup>9</sup> Language differences, they say, provide the best explanation. Here again there is some truth.

1950; Otto Klineberg, *Race Differences*, New York, 1935; Alfred L. Kroeber, *Anthropology: Race, Language, Culture, Psychology, Prehistory*, New York, 1948; Ralph Linton, *The Study of Man: An Introduction*, New York, 1936; UNESCO, *The Race Concept: Results of An Inquiry*, Paris, 1952.

<sup>8</sup> Basic statements on the theory are Vladimir Lenin, *Critical Remarks on the National Question*, Moscow, 1951; Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question: A Collection of Articles and Speeches*, New York, n.d. For a comment see Alfred D. Low, *Lenin and the Question of Nationality*, New York, 1958.

<sup>9</sup> There are many studies. The best is Otto Jespersen's *Mankind, Nation and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View*, Oslo, 1925, but Ferdinand Brunot's *Histoire de langue française*, Paris, 1904-47, is a monument of patriotic erudition on the subject.

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After all, languages do differ, do divide. An American in Paris feels strange, partly because "Il ne parle pas," "Il ne comprend." An American schoolmarm in Paris when she orders a thirst quencher, may not get orange juice but wine. Language differences are hardly the reason for nations, however. Englishmen and Americans speak a common language, or at least they did at the time of the War of Independence. Peoples, even the French, have had to be forced by governmental edict to speak a common language. All languages are medleys of other languages and of foreign words, forever growing forever changing. Language may or may not be a distinguishing national factor.

But enough of myths, though there are others which we might profitably discuss; for instance, the eager zeal of historians to find national origins long before the evidence permits. How did nations and nationalism historically come into existence? Here we must be brief and we shall, of course, skim the surface and run the ever present danger of oversimplification.

Nationalism is a product of history, of nurture not nature. Nations were not born full grown, nor are men born with love of nation inherent in them.<sup>10</sup> Nations and nationalism originated and developed in late medieval and modern history, out of the institutions, the ideas, the conditions of the past six-to-seven hundred years.<sup>11</sup> All I can do here, of course, is to show in outline how institutions and ideas combined to produce them. This is a staggering enough task. You will bear with me as I zoom through history.

From about 1100 to 1600 in western Europe, the monarchs of the middle and late medieval period built, largely by war and diplomacy, large territorial domains. Over these they ruled—established common laws and courts, collected taxes, and raised troops. In short, they imposed a common national authority over a territory and the people or peoples inhabiting it. Through hundreds of years there arose among the inhabitants, say the French

<sup>10</sup> J. Piaget, "The Development in Children of the Idea of the Homeland and of Relations with Other Countries," *International Social Science Bulletin*, Vol. II, 1951.

<sup>11</sup> Believing that nationalism appeared earlier some medievalists would disagree. Compare G. G. Coulton, "Nationalism in the Middle Ages," *Cambridge Historical Journal*, Vol. V, 1935; or Gaines Post, "Two Notes on Nationalism in the Middle Ages," *Traditio*, Vol. IX, 1953.

or English, a feeling of common history, of common tragedies and glories, a consciousness of common needs of trade and defense, and often the reality of a common language. Here, then, was a basis for a nation.

Sometime during the eighteenth century, we cannot pinpoint a date, the middle classes began to feel that the nation belonged to all the property owners.<sup>12</sup> This was not a new phenomenon, rather it rooted deep in the past; nor was the feeling restricted to the middle classes—a good many nobles and clergymen felt the same way. Now when the nation belonged not only to the king but also to the property-owning people, these people had an interest in the national welfare and thought they should have a voice in national affairs. "When," Voltaire wrote, "those who possess like myself, fields and houses, assemble for their common interests, I have a voice in this assembly. I am a part of the whole, a part of the community. A part of the sovereign. Here is my fatherland."<sup>13</sup> When men possessed a fatherland, they became citizens, not just subjects, and being citizens they could demand or give to themselves rights and privileges. This, in part, was what happened in 1688, 1776, and 1789. There were, then, new reasons for many to be devoted to the nation. Popular nationalism in contradistinction to dynastic nationalism was beginning. Soon all inhabitants, at least all native inhabitants of a nation, were considering themselves citizens entitled to national rights such as those guaranteed by the English unwritten and the American and French written constitutions. And, in turn, as the nation afforded rights and benefits, the citizens were patriotic, that is, nationalistic, national-minded.

The great wars of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic era accelerated the process. Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards, Italians all believed themselves threatened or oppressed, feared the foreigners, warred with national armies against each other. Fear led to intensifying national hatreds, greater reliance upon the national governments; and these national governments in

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Robert Palmer, "The National Idea in France before the Revolution," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. I, 1940, and Boyd C. Shafer, "Bourgeois Nationalism in the Pamphlets on the Eve of the Revolution," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. X, 1938.

<sup>13</sup> *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 1785, Vol. XLII, pp. 263-4.

consequence acquired more and more power, more and more prestige. The nation became the vehicle of men's hopes and their fortresses against fear, the symbol of better times to come, a refuge in time of trouble.

The governments of the nation-states, to satisfy the most ardent patriots, began consciously to make good citizens, to force all citizens into the national molds. The more they acted, the more nationalist their citizens became, and the more these citizens demanded national institutions, national ways of living. National governments made the churches and even religion national. By military conscription and *levées en masse* they created national armies. Through the establishment of national school systems they fostered national patriotism. Laws, courts, taxes all became increasingly national rather than local or provincial. The citizens thus were conditioned to be interested in, involved in their nation, their nation-state, their common needs and aspirations. On national holidays, on Fourth's or Fourteenth's of July, they celebrated the winning of national independence or national freedoms, and they sang the praises of their nations in a *Rule Britannia*, a *Star-Spangled Banner*, a *Marseillaise*, or a *Deutschland über Alles*.

During the nineteenth century the nationalism we have seen beginning in western Europe spread over the world, deepened and intensified everywhere. Europeans not only carried their trade, their diseases, and their guns to Africa, Asia, and the Americas; they carried the spirit of nationalism. The Asian, African, and American nationalisms developed in most respects like those of Europe, though perhaps because the Asian and African<sup>14</sup> were sparked by hatred and fear of the foreign oppression more than hope for the achievement of liberties, they contained perhaps less fervid love of country and more hatred of the oppressors. In any

<sup>14</sup> Studies of Asian and African nationalism are just beginning. There is no good over-all survey. Some recent studies are: Harry J. Benda, "Revolution and Nationalism in the Non-Western World," in Warren S. Hunsberger, *New Era in the Non-Western World*, Ithaca, 1957; Leonard Binder, "Pakistan and Modern Islamic-Nationalist Theory," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. II, 1957; Delmar Brown, *Nationalism in Japan*, Berkeley, 1955; James S. Coleman, *Nigeria, Background to Nationalism*, Berkeley, 1958; John K. Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, 1958; John De Francis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China*, Princeton, 1950; Thomas Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*, New York, 1957; and Hazem Z. Nuseibeh, *The Ideas of Arab Nationalism*, Ithaca, 1956.

case, the peoples of the whole world all came to be divided into nations, each people thinking of itself as being different, disliking and fearing other peoples, being devoted almost exclusively to its own national interests.

Almost every activity and idea seemed to conspire to promote nationalism. Ideas re-enforced national institutions. These institutions fostered national ideas. How could men enlarge their freedoms, obtain protection against the vicissitudes of everyday life or foreign enemies? Through unity of thought and action within their own nations. What once king, noble, and priest provided for them in the way of protection, the independent national state could do and do more completely and efficiently. Outside the state, though increasingly brought within it, economic forces and cultural influences worked toward the same national ends. Railroads stitched the Italian boot, made possible the economic cohesiveness upon which Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Cavour could politically unify Italy. In the United States, Henry Clay's "American System," and similar schemes brought the sections together. Everywhere tariffs protected national economic interests. Banking systems became national and, later, great industries became national industries with plants and sales covering the nation. All these chiefly protected and aided business. But workers and farmers became involved, as well, as they demanded, and over the years usually obtained, protection against foreign labor or crops, as they received social insurance or crop loans, and as they were guaranteed minimum wages or parity prices.

Men do not necessarily love the hand that feeds them or worship their benefactors. Indeed some men have fought against the pervading patriotism and resisted the power of the Leviathan national states. The fact remains that over the world men have become increasingly national-minded. When the Negro in the United States wants equality, he asks action by the national government because he thinks that he cannot get this equality through any other agency. When the Hungarians want rights today, they believe that they must throw off Russian domination and obtain Hungarian independence. They know no other way. For the achievement of needs and desires, for order and safety, the nation seems to be the modern means.

Everything the citizen hears and sees seems to re-enforce this observation. The radio is national, television is national. The schools teach national citizenship. The historians chiefly teach and write national histories. Literature and cooking and sports are judged on national criteria. Even science and music, written in international notation and symbol, becomes Russian, German, French, or American rather than just science and music. To make certain that national values rather than others prevail, patriotic societies in every country demand with some success that foreign influences be rooted out, that only good national or "one hundred per cent" ideas be encouraged. A man does not necessarily love his benefactor, but in this case he has not much opportunity to do otherwise.

The nation-state has hence often become an end in itself, the one end, indeed, socially approved for the supreme sacrifice. It can and often does in our contemporary world, control everything a man does or thinks, especially in times of national emergencies. The most extreme nationalisms of our time, those of Hitler and Mussolini, grew out of war, lived on war or probability of war, and themselves made war. Here we see nationalism self-perpetuating, each nationalism living and growing in imitation and in fear of other nationalisms. To beat Nazism and Fascism, as Goebbels and the Nazis predicted, other nations unfortunately had to become somewhat like them. "The true nationalist," the French newspaper *L'Action Française* once declared, "places the fatherland above everything." Not all men in the twentieth century were "true nationalists" in this ultimate sense, but the pressures which conditioned them were relentlessly pushing them in that direction.

Is there no way out of this never-ending circle, whether it is vicious or not? I am a historian. I cannot predict. If we are to have, at any future time, a truly international order above the nations, or if we are to have a world state, the international or world government will have to grow as national governments did, and if it is to have substance and viability, if indeed it is to exist, it will have to touch the vital interests of each world citizen.<sup>15</sup> It, too, will have to grow, as nationalism did, out of the concrete fears and hopes, desires and actions of people who are passionately interested in its maintenance for their own freedom and safety. It will, too, have to

<sup>15</sup> This is a theme of Norman Cousins, *Who Speaks for Man*, New York, 1953.

afford the promise of a better life and, at the same time, protect man in the ways national governments have. But whether this can or will happen, whether or not we have time in this age of national hydrogen bombs, I do not know.

The reality of nationalism is the feeling of people, a feeling based upon each people's historical myths and realities. The reality of the nation lies in the hope and freedom, the protection and security it affords. If nationalism is to be succeeded by some new loyalty, to a world religion or a world state, some other realities, some new myths will have to provide as much and touch the citizens of the present nations as deeply.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For future articles and reviews of books on nationalism, the student should consult scholarly journals such as *The American Historical Review* and *The American Political Science Review*.

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